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The Implications of Victimhood Identity: The Case of 'Persecution' of Swedish Hunters

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Abstract

This ethnographically based study examines Swedish hunters' claims to victimhood through appeal to the term 'persecution'. Perceiving disenfranchisement, injustice and discrimination on the basis of wolf conservation policy, we present hunters' self-styled predicament as victimhood-claimants of persecution at the hands of a state that has been co-opted by a conservationist, pro-wolf agenda that systematically disenfranchises rural and hunting interests and lifestyles. Through the phenomenological accounts of hunter respondents, our paper takes seriously the hunters' perception of persecution and, likewise, considers the opposite case made by conservationists: that wolves have been, and continue to be, the real victims of persecution in the conflict. Nonetheless, we show that the persecution language as it is applied from opposing parties in the conflict is problematic inasmuch as it is focused around creating a moral panic and confusion among the Swedish public who are ultimately responsible, as a democratic body-politic, for assessing the legitimacy of claims to moral wrong-doing and legal redress for the wronged. Our case study joins scholarship that explores the pathologies of claims to victimization by populist rural interest groups in the context of controversial conservation directives.

Keywords

Conservationists; deliberation; hunters; persecution; wolves.

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Introduction

The concept of persecution is intended to convey some extreme moral wrong or harm (Kuosmanen 2014). Such extreme injustice places the legitimate state under a binding obligation to provide legal protections for the victims of persecution (Lister 2013). This, at any rate, is how the concept of persecution is used correctly in philosophical and legal discourse. Nonetheless, significant value may be attached to the claim that one is being persecuted, even when it is highly doubtful that one is genuinely the victim of any extreme wrong or harm that rises to the level of persecution (Jacoby 2015). Indeed, claiming for oneself the status of persecuted, and attributing to one's political opponents the status of persecutors, can be an effective way to build cohesion and solidarity within the collective that is purportedly wronged (Meister 2002). It can also be a means for victimhood-claimants to sway public opinion and sympathy to their side by formulating their perceptions of injustice through an idea that has moral purchase in society and fits within a comprehensive belief system (Jacoby 2015; McCauley and Moskalenko 2008).

In this paper, we explore a particular case in which self-styled victimization is employed extensively, but counterproductively, from the perspective of publicly defensible principles of justice. The empirical case we engage with is the wolf conservation controversy in the Nordic countries, and more particularly in Sweden (see, for example, Sjölander-Lindqvist 2011; Bisi and Kurki 2008), where contemporary hunters do not hesitate to present themselves as wronged—indeed 'persecuted'—by current conservation policy. Their claim of persecution, while it may be done in sincerity, is shown to have a discursive closing effect on democracy (Deetz 1992). Indeed, in this case and in that of philosophically and legally ungrounded claims to victimhood and persecution generally, such an effect increases polarization between the purportedly persecuted and persecutors (Sunstein 2002). It also leads to escalation of conflict and increased circulation of essentialist claims between political rivals (Jacoby, 2015; Varvin, 2005). This is predicated on the idea that persecution language obscures by oversimplifying complex issues requiring calm and sober analysis, and compromise or meeting-in-the-middle solutions (Jacoby, 2015).

It is worth noting that the case of hunters and wolves implies a reversal of victim and offender in the dialectic of persecution; the past outlaw status of the wolf and its extirpation from agrarian landscapes by hunters has lead scholars as well as the public to commonly identify *wolves* as the victims of persecution (Bell 2015; Bergström, Dirke and Dannell 2015; Fernández and Ruiz de Azua 2010; Mykrä and Pohja-Mykrä 2005; Sharpe, Norton and Donnelley 2001). What makes Nordic hunters believe they are persecuted by the state over its protection of wolves today? For one, there may be a dimension of 'paranoid persecution' (Varvin 2005). Both Norwegian and Finnish hunters, for example, talk about a systematic devastation of the countryside currently underway (Bisi and Kurki 2008), in which wolves are deployed by the state elites as biological weapons to bring about the death of the rural (Bell, Lloyd and Vatovec 2010). In Sweden, hunters present themselves as the victims of the climate of suspicion and harassment provided by a hegemonic network comprising Environmental Non-Governmental Organizations like the Swedish Society for Nature Protection and the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency. The normative significance of the applying the term 'Persecutor!' to such a coalition is that it enables the hunters to claim the *subaltern* position of victims, deserving public sympathy and owed redress for their purported grievances and injustices under modern policy (Gledhill 2012).

We do not question that persecution claims may be interesting on legal and philosophical grounds. But, in this paper, we engage specifically with their potential impact on the political debate and what these claims by a minority demand of the state and of the public which stands accused of such a practice. Claiming the subaltern position can produce for the hunters a moral panic (Becker 1963/1991) among the Swedish public who are confronted with the disturbing prospect that, as the popular sovereign-body ultimately responsible for the law of the land, they are responsible for persecuting the inhabitants of the Swedish heartland, the traditional stewards of Sweden's wildlife populations, and good and honest people. Indeed, sometimes acts of outright defiance, such as the

illegal killings of protected wolves, are justified by hunters on the basis of their claim to be persecuted. Hunters may neutralize illegal killings of wolves either by the metaphor of the ledger (Matza and Sykes 1961) or by condemnation of the condemners (saying those who impose the laws are the perpetrators of injustice, as in Pohja-Mykrä 2016).

What this means is that the language of persecution serves, in part, as a neutralizing function for illegal hunters, but also as a potentially democratic function by putting and keeping the controversy over wolf conservation on the public agenda and in the media (von Essen 2016). In this paper, we focus our attention squarely on the democratic features and implications of persecution. Indeed, we argue that hunters' claims to be persecuted signal the need for a substantially better informed public dialogue over the wolf conservation controversy. Such a dialogue should look beyond the language of persecution and subalternity, and should be equally skeptical towards the claims made by different sides to the controversy, including claims made by conservationists that hunters are the persecutors of wolves in the present.

In the first two sections of the paper, we examine the basis of the competing persecution claims. The first section is thus concerned with how wolves have been and continue to be persecuted by hunters, while the second section—supported by our empirical study—is concerned with hunters who now perceive themselves as the victims of persecution under conservation policy. In the third section, we then analyze the ambivalent effects of these claims for democracy. Indeed, moving beyond a battle for the moral high ground as implied by claims to victimhood and persecution (Varvin 2005), we conclude with some remarks on recent innovations in the theory and design of democratic institutions. These innovations may facilitate such a movement, particularly from the point of view of re-engaging those whose felt experience of persecution has resulted in their retreat into a subaltern community of resentment (Meister 2002)

Method

We conducted and coded a total of 39 semi-structured interviews with Swedish hunters for the FORMAS-funded interdisciplinary research project *Confronting Challenges to the Legitimacy of the Regulatory Regime: The Case Illegal Hunting in Sweden* (2014-2016). These thematic interviews sought to investigate Swedish hunters' relationship with state agencies; attitudes toward laws and their legitimacy; perspectives on wolf conservation policies; and the extent to which hunters perceived themselves to be *disenfranchised* from the polity at present. The research was set against a background of declining trust in government on the part of the hunting community in regard to wolf conservation infringing upon their lifestyles and livelihoods (Sandström et al. 2014; von Essen et al. 2015). Despite this, self-identified pro-hunting lobbyists or activists were not actively sought out for interviewing. Ordinary hunter respondents were identified as part of a snowball approach that operated from a tripartite point of departure: contacts to the researchers; hunters contacted via the largest online forum for hunters in Sweden, Robsoft, given this is an all-purpose gathering of all hunters; and, finally, hunters affiliated with county branches of either of the two Swedish hunting associations. This last group most often functioned as a liaison for connecting with other hunters in their counties.

The snowballing process resulted in a respondent sample ranging from age 21 years to age 90 years. All types of hunters were interviewed across the country so as to capture all hunting profiles, including hunters who worked in industry and those who held service or academic jobs; men and women; traditional hunters born and bred in the countryside within hunting families; and those who had been introduced to hunting later in life and scholastically. In this way, the respondent sample was representative of the increasing demographic diversity that characterizes Nordic hunting communities today (Hansen, Peterson and Jensen 2012). While interviews were conducted in northern, southern, western and eastern counties to capture local hunting traditions, many respondents also had geographically diverse backgrounds, having lived or hunted in several places.

Because of the sensitive nature of several questions pertaining to law-breaking or to inflammatory attitudes toward named persons and state agencies, indirect interview techniques were often utilized, focusing on hypothetical scenarios and hunters' being able to relay peer attitudes (Rubin and Rubin 2012). Additionally, by structuring the interview guide into five main thematic sections (background information; hunting ethics; the relationship between hunters and public agencies; the informal institution of hunting; and reflections on the future), each section was able to function as a mini-restart during occasionally tense conversations in which hunters strongly engaged in impression management to establish a baseline of law-abidingness and reason (see Monin and Miller 2001). Indeed, the interview progression revealed increasingly critical opinions once these baselines had been clarified and trust had been gained. The five sections allowed the respondent to come back to the overarching theme of state distrust and a legitimacy crisis through a different set of vocabulary: ethics; relations to public bodies; non-compliance; or desired changes for the future (Alvesson 2003). The coding scheme for the analysis clustered hunters' experiences of their perceived persecution at the hands of the state, local state agencies and other Environmental Non-Governmental Organisations (ENGO) they accused of being powerful lobbyists, agenda-setters and ultimately persecutors in the current wildlife conservation regime in Sweden. The findings from interviews strongly cohere with concurrent empirical findings about hunters from Norway and Finland (Bisi et al. 2010; Krange and Skogen 2011; Linnell 2013; Risvoll, Fedreheim and Galafassi 2016). Hunters' reflections are presented phenomenologically in line with the research's objectives, meaning that we understand their claims and experiences of persecution as *a priori* truthful. However, observing the moral and strategic effects of such victimization, our discussion evaluates not the ontological assessment of persecution but the implications of invoking it as a label.

For the literature review on *wolf* persecution, we conducted a search of present and historical (archival) accounts of wolf hunting techniques and extirpation campaigns. Sources were first and foremost selected on the basis of featuring the term 'persecution + wolf'. But we also consulted additional literature that provided historical accounts of past wolf hunting practices, state bounties and battues to kill wolves. One thing we found was that wolf persecution practices are often globally generalizable—which we note in select cases when referring to literature from other parts of the world—but the context focus is on the Nordic setting of wolf persecution. It is worth noting that, unlike the North American tradition of professional wolf cullers hired by the state, wolf killings in the Nordic countries were typically the responsibility of the public (Tillhagen 1987). However, as we will show, the nobility's interests strongly influenced the state to legally compel the public to undertake wolf hunting (Bergström, Dirke and Dannell 2015).

The persecution of wolves

The following section unpacks the traditional claim that wolves have been, and continue to be, persecuted by hunters. In other words, they are the victims of sustained state-sanctioned injustice. When interpreting the persecution of wolves loosely from Kuosmanen's (2014) perspective, three elements in particular stand out as hallmarks of Swedish wolf persecution: (1) the gruesome techniques used to kill and harass them; (2) the institutional support of persecution through state laws, bounties and mandatory battues; and (3) accounts, exaggerations and denunciation of the wolf's species-specific characteristics that make it a target for persecution.

In the Nordic countries, the state's backing of wolf persecution has been explicit in two approaches. One was through bounties, an economic incentive found worldwide (Sharpe, Norton and Donnelley 2001; Walker and Cronon 2009). This practice originated in the 1600s and did not end until 1966 when the wolf received its protected status. The second state-supported approach to extirpating the wolf was to mobilize entire villagers or counties of villages in so-called wolf raids to drive out and kill noxious wolves in the area (Bergström, Dirke and Dannell 2015). This phenomenon has been prevalent across the European continent, termed wolf *battues* in France (Alleau and Linnell 2015), *loberas* in Spain (referring to the pit-like constructions into which wolves were driven by villagers; see also *varggård* in Swedish) (Fernández and Ruiz de

Azua 2010), and *vargskall* in Sweden (Tillhagen 1987). Dirke (2015) contends that zealotry over wolf persecution was strongly reproduced by the nobility to secure sufficient game in the forests for their hunting. The press, in turn, which served the interests of the nobility, was instrumental in encouraging anti-wolf actions (Mykrä and Pohja-Mykrä 2005).

The persecution of wolves is described in the literature as having proceeded rapidly upon the development of firearms. But before then, wolves could also be captured by leg-hold traps, wolf trap pits, poison, spearing and baiting (Fernández and Ruiz de Azua 2010). Poison typically used a combination of strychnine and brucine in Sweden, which induces cramps and paralysis of respiratory organs. In a particularly unsavory practice that has come to be known as the 'Swedish System' in North America and other places, wolves or wolf pups could be skinned, mutilated and lynched while their distress calls lured their parents into traps (Bergström, Dirke and Dannell 2015). Moreover, if a wolf was caught in a pit, it could be clubbed to death slowly on account of its captors desiring 'to have a few words with it' regarding its crimes.

The persecution of wolves could arguably be sustained only in a popular climate of hatred toward the wolf, one in which law and folk culture interacted to exterminate it (Masius and Sprenger 2015b). In Sharpe, Norton and Donnelley (2001: 175), it is suggested that 'when we cast wolves as the embodiment of human vice, that is, when we see wolves as evil, cruel, or vicious, we are given license to persecute, punish and kill them'. In this sense, social constructions of the wolf fed into a moral panic that was perpetuated by the current powers as the moral entrepreneurs (Becker 1963/1991). Walker and Cronon (2009) agree that 'creating and killing wolves represent two approaches to controlling them' and consequently that the way the wolf was depicted, referred to and culturally reproduced was done to aid its persecution. Even at a time where other large carnivores like lynx, bear and wolverine caused equal damage to livestock and property, there appeared a clear taxonomic bias in the Nordic countries toward the wolf as the chief culprit (Mykrä, Vuorisalo and Pohja-Mykrä 2015), something which has been shown to continue today (Fernández-Gil et al. 2016). Hermans (2015) writes that 'exaggeration, alteration, even re-creation' tended to characterize wolf stories.

Species-specific characteristics of the wolf that make it worthy of animosity can be found throughout historical literary sources. It is seen as a thrill-killer, a remorseless serial killer killing for sport (Bell 2015), bloodthirsty, sly, villainous (Tillhagen 1987), untrustworthy and a threat to the moral economy of predation by preying on tame animals and livestock (Bogliogli 2009; Masius and Sprenger 2015a). Tillhagen's (1987) archival studies from counties in Sweden testify to such representations:

When wolves left the forests and ventured out into the open fields, they would ravage anything in their midst.

Wolves desired to attack pregnant wives.

Indeed, this taxonomic bias toward wolves is evident also in the conflation in people's minds and in historical accounts of 'any aggressive wild beast' with that of a wolf attack (Dirke 2015). Dirke (2015) reports such stories often travelled great distances and across national boundaries to be told by Swedes. Even wolves themselves were often framed as particularly dangerous when they immigrated into Sweden from across the border. Wolves from the East mobilized xenophobic resentment and added to the urgency of extirpating them (Bergström, Dirke and Dannell 2015). In summary, the interaction of institutional law, folk stories and media accounts greatly facilitated wolf extirpation and neutralized unsavory killing practices.

In the present situation, the predicament of wolves is greatly changed from yesteryear's state-late extirpation campaigns. The broader public opinion is now firmly supportive of wolves' return to the Swedish landscape (Kagervall et al. 2012; Sandström et al. 2014). The large carnivores are

now seen as an integral part of the natural heritage of Sweden and as a flagship species of contemporary nature conservation and ecosystem services (such as keeping deer populations down). But the wolf has been embraced by the public as a charismatic, sentient moral subject to whom rights and restorative justice is owed by the Swedish state (Tønnessen 2010). A broadly conservationist public now view illegal hunters, and sometimes legal hunters as well, as terrorists and offenders of hate crimes when they target large carnivores (Hagstedt and Korsell 2012; Sollund 2016). Testifying to this shift in perception, where whole villages previously mobilized in battues to kill wolves as outlined above, animal rights activists and anti-poaching units in Sweden now roam the forest during legal wolf culls, using pots and pans to scare away wolves from death by hunters (von Essen 2016). Wolves enjoy ostensive protection from any form of hunting by featuring in the Annex VI of the EU Habitats Directive for nature conservation, in which the species is listed as in need of strict protection. Only in extremely rare cases are exemptions to protection granted, and these often tend to be appealed in Sweden, to the dismay of the hunters and livestock farmers who apply for them (Epstein and Darpö 2013; von Essen and Allen 2017).

It is worth noting that, despite public support for wolves, the considerable resources invested in their conservation and state sponsoring of ENGOs that safeguard the protection of the wolf, many rural communities remain skeptical toward the presence of wolves. Based on population assessments, it is estimated that up to one third of wolves in Sweden and Norway perish from illegal hunting by such recalcitrant communities (Liberg et al. 2012). Although it is difficult to arrive at such estimates given the evasive nature of poaching, reports of illegal hunting of wolves frequently surface in counterpublic media (von Essen 2015). 'Proxy' communication of illegal hunting by 'someone you know' is done by peers (von Essen and Allen 2015); there is also mounting physical evidence in the form of lost radio collars for wolves.

In extreme cases, illegal hunting has become known to the public through the delivery in protest of body parts of dead wolves to state agencies (Hagstedt and Korsell 2012). Although the broader public and the state—indeed, even the hunting associations in Sweden in their official stance—do not condone illegal hunting, anti-wolf sentiment has festered in many rural communities which feel betrayed by the government because of its prioritization of wildlife conservation goals above rural development. They help reproduce a popular climate of state distrust and wolf hatred, one that is enclaved from the outside and often protective of the identities of illegal hunters (Peltola, Ratamäki and Pellikka 2013; Pohja-Mykrä and Kurki 2014).

The persecution of hunters

Our semi-structured interviews with hunters generally did not turn up categorical hatred toward the wolf in itself, even if some (particularly older) hunters affirmed it had problematic species-specific characteristics that justified its persecution, as in the following reflections:

It's a bloody cruel animal.

They've also been exterminated for a reason.

I don't believe it's a coincidence that we once exterminated the wolf.

Our ancestors knew what they were doing 150 years ago.

For the most part, however, hunters attributed the problem with wolves to their mismanagement at the hands of a co-opted state that marched to the tune of sentimental animal rights interests and conservation agendas. Indeed, an overwhelming majority of hunters interviewed saw that, in a kind of reversal of persecution, they were now the minority being discriminated against, being 'hunted' (as two respondents put it) and in danger of becoming extinct. This was a picture they communicated in the following three representations of themselves: (1) as at the mercy of a

hegemonic network of powerful conservation alliances, (2) as unfairly targeted by the criminal justice system; and (3) as scrutinized and sensationalised in the media.

In the first representation, hunters suggested they were living in a democratic dictatorship in which it was:

no coincidence the environmental minister in Brussels has a wolf on his desk.

They observed the conservation agenda originated with the European Union (EU) parliament and was powerfully implemented by national allies like the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA), the Swedish Society for Nature Protection, the Large Carnivore Association and even the civil servants at the County Administrative Boards who were seen to be the same sort of people with the same sort of biological backgrounds. Respondents insisted questionable interlinkages existed between state agencies and non-state associations; for example:

The Swedish Society for Nature Protection has two full time solicitors who are financed by the SEPA. Their only job is to appeal these decisions. Which the SEPA makes. There's just something not right in the whole system there.

People circulating in and out of these associations and state agencies, who were seemingly produced on a conveyor belt, were termed 'ideologues'. They were described as wanting:

to inflict maximum damage and misery on hunters and to put a stop to as much as they can.

Another respondent suggested they intentionally operated with the point of departure:

How should we infringe on the rest of society's liberties to undertake protective measures for this species?

'The rest of society' was typically the hunters: unfairly targeted and economically burdened with the costs of wildlife conservation. In the current regime, respondents contended:

You can't say wolf out loud in society without risk to oneself.

A wolf is more worth than a human.

You get the sense they're working against us sometimes.

Respondents also saw that this hegemonic network had powerfully infiltrated the economic agenda, whereby wolf conservation mobilized resources that the rural communities of hunters would never otherwise see for other crime, healthcare or economic investment in the region.

I mean how the hell can you spend so much money on it I wonder? Just like I said, a wolf is more worth than a human.

This one wolf, he was genetically valuable, but I don't know how many times they moved him [sic] or how many millions they spent, maybe 5-6 millions.

Seems to be that these wolves can cost just about however much they want.

Two other respondents said:

Can't we spend in on anything better, like elder care?

I mean, compare it with beds in the hospital.

Many respondents directly connected the emergence of the expensive wolf conservation with a deteriorating rural industry and depopulated landscape.

They've let go 500 people. I'm not one of them, but I'm still affected ... it's the largest company here so it's really difficult.

The predicament was described as a hard blow to hunters, psychologically, socially and politically. Predicated on the understanding that many rural communities existed solely because they functioned as hunting hubs to residents or to 'returners' who had moved into the city, the wolf's presence and predation of game stocks and hunting dogs were argued to make the traditional hunting lifestyle impossible. Within this, respondents said:

[Hunters] are basically depressed for eight months of the year and then they're exuberant for four months straight.

They live for the moose hunt a few weeks every autumn. That's why they live in Värmland in the forest in the middle of nowhere and drive 150 km to work ... unless the goal is to depopulate the entire Swedish countryside I think you have to take these things seriously.

You're devastated as they cancel the moose hunt for the third year in a row in Värmland ... I think it's disrespectful against their way of living and those people that have chosen to reside there.

In some areas they say hunting's all but dried up. I imagine that's quite a big shift for those living in the countryside for the particular reason they're interested in that.

In addition to having co-opted the state economic agenda, hunters saw that the criminal justice system was now arrayed against them in terms of practicing unnecessarily harsh policing and sentencing of suspected illegal hunting compared to other more serious forms of crime.

I think the legislation is unnecessarily harsh. You lose your licenses too easily, you can get four years in prison for shooting a wolf, which I find unreasonable. There are many who get charged with physical assault who barely do any jail time.

Let's say you and I are on bad terms and I kill you. I'll get away with less time in prison.

Seems like there's very severe punishments for [illegal hunting]. Surprisingly hard compared to a lot of other stuff.

Something's not right ... you have less severe punishment for killing a man than a wolf. It's not relevant.

Sometimes it just makes you wonder, getting more time on your sentence than murderers.

It contributed to a sense of powerlessness around an inability to defend one's own property as such an act could have:

grave consequences. Where I'm from people have gone to prison for it. That's tragic. It shouldn't be like that.

Both policing and sentences, it was argued, were deployed strategically to 'send a message' to hunters to stay in line and to get on board with the wolf conservation program. Hence, in areas that rarely saw a police or ambulance pass through in a year, even when it was needed, respondents noted how 'East German Style surveillance' now applied for suspected illegal hunters. Reminiscing about a recent case (Lillhärda), two respondents argued:

There were police helicopters, police officers, investigators, prosecutors.

Since a wolf was involved, all of a sudden it was a CIA style criminal investigation ... as soon as a wolf's in the picture things get pretty distorted.

The major grievance lay not just in the public stigma, but also in the prosecutor's seemingly arbitrary ability to revoke the hunters' weapons license and rifles during an intentionally prolonged investigation. Several respondents considered this risk to be the principal deterrent to any law breaking, and suggested the regulatory regime was well aware of the effect.

I think it's regrettable their seizing of weapons from people who are obviously not at risk to society, but it changes their lives so substantially.

Finally, persecution was seen to be enacted toward hunters through the work of the media as a relentless microscope firmly fixed on hunters' conduct. Respondents argued that:

We have a set of journalists who increasingly live on Södermalm and see the world accordingly and stuff like illegal hunting becomes a juicy headline. So that becomes a way of setting the agenda.

There are those that claim we live in a mediocracy. That it's actually media that controls things in this country to the extent that if you're on their radar you're basically screwed as a group, individual, or whatever.

The power of the conservationist controlled media, one contended, meant the smallest misconduct on the part of a lone hunter was magnified to make 'the whole collective look bad'.

As a hunter you know that if this kind of stuff occurs it will be used to target all hunters even if only 100 have committed such acts.

This little thing happened and the press swoops in and magnifies it to this great big thing. The sensation of it, these animal rights organisations are constantly here watching us and as soon as there's any transgression by hunters it get blown out of all proportion.

The media was described as a noxious force that could sensationalize, distort and misrepresent hunters in the present, especially before an urban public that did not have ties to the countryside and were easily susceptible to media accounts of hunting and wildlife. Among other things, a de facto monitoring of hunters was argued to take place through wildlife surveillance cameras put up by the County Administrative Boards. One respondent described this as a thinly veiled attempt to keep hunters on their toes and termed it:

Countryside cinema

We hunters are hunted. As soon as there's something ... I saw a headline not long ago ... someone murdered their wife 'hunter kills wife'.

Public opinion and sympathy for wolves, one argued, was drummed up in cushy charismatic accounts of the 'media's wolf' as portrayals of hunters as thrill-killing sportsmen. Respondents reflected at length about meta-stereotyping, observing that their current image was unfortunately often characterised by:

some kind of xenophobia that I find very unpleasant.

An often-repeated refrain was that:

The public, they're the one that are after us.

There was a potent sense in which hunters perceived themselves to be at the mercy of public acceptance and had to tread carefully so as not to lose what little goodwill was left:

You've gotta understand that we can hunt only exactly as long as a majority of the public finds it acceptable. The day the majority no longer thinks that, we're done

If we're to keep hunting we gotta do it nicely ... if there's no acceptance among the public we won't be allowed to keep doing it.

This was a constant challenge, because ordinary hunting conduct that had been uncontroversial in the field had a tendency to become magnified and distorted under the media's microscope:

When the [wolf collar] tracker stops working it's very easy to say it's shot and gone. But the truth might be different. We have difficulty proving it. But in the media, it gets to be a certain way.

Within this, one suggested that there was little or no possibility for hunters to contest or correct these representations once they hit the media.

They've tried but they are not let through. They are not heard in the media.

[We] can't get a word in edgewise. Only the wolf-huggers get to run their mouths.

Hunters were also appalled at the routine harassment that increasingly befell them at the hands of animal rights activists. The same harassment when levelled against animal rights activists, hunters surmised, would scarcely be tolerated. Respondents recalled a hostile climate in which hunters were subject to threats, both online and in person, suffered smashed windshields, and received disturbing phone calls, slander and property damage.

We had some problems here before. They would burn cars at the butcher's and stuff like that.

There was a period here in Umeå where you really had to keep it on the down-low.

We've had these militant vegans and the like. They've set fire to hunters' cars and stuff like that.

They came walking through the forest with pots and pans to scare the wolf.

In summary, hunters described their predicament under present wolf conservation measures as unjust and increasingly desperate. The state, the media and public opinion rattled them as a social group to the point where they were afraid to speak their minds in some circles, or felt they would be obliged to give up on a hunting lifestyle altogether. Although some respondents admitted hunting was not a basic need but more of an esoteric pursuit, they also affirmed that 'in some places' of Sweden, it was the identity and *raison d'être* of residents, and that infringing on this lifestyle was discriminatory.

Democratic ambivalence of victimhood-claims to be persecuted

What can be gleaned from the above ethnographic study when viewed from the perspective of how persecution is conceived philosophical and legal discourse? When persecution is invoked in the present wolf conservation controversy, our empirical findings show that it is not only to rationalize potential legal transgressions (for which there was also quite low tolerance among our sample of hunter respondents), but also as partisan politics to inspire sympathy and legitimacy for their position (Skogen, Mauz and Krange 2008; also see Theodorakea and von Essen 2016).

By characterising themselves as good and honest law-abiding people doing what they have always done, and the ENGO-co-opted state as 'a malevolent force' (Skogen, Mauz and Krange 2008) behind everything from political disenfranchisement to economic decline in the countryside, hunters conjure up a binary of the ideal victim and the ideal offender (Christie 1986). Indeed, reflections on repeated harassment, surveillance and sabotage of hunting by paramilitary citizen associations or state-financed organisations showed hunters consider their persecutors to bear classic hallmarks of offenders: as powerful actors who exercised power in discriminatory, arbitrary and incomprehensible ways (Fitzgerald 2010).

While focusing on the political character and implications of persecution rhetoric, we do not question the sincerity of the hunters' self-perceptions as victims of persecution. Although to assess the categorical extent to which hunters are persecuted is not within the scope of this paper, hunters are clearly not genuine victims of persecution, philosophically or legally speaking (Kuosmanen 2014; Lister 2013; Locke 2010; Mill 1974). That said, however, even if Swedish hunters' claims to persecution may seem innocuous given their relative rights in a well-developed democratic society, scholars suggest that the scope of victimhood is evolving particularly in such states (Jacoby 2015). Victims here are 'not the most repressed and emarginated of groups' but those who experience contradictions between expectations and current rights (Melucci 1996: 296).

For one thing, hunters' comparatively greater opportunities for political expressions, freedoms and expectations of participation (to, say, authoritarian regimes denying freedom of speech and expression) are more conducive to victimhood constructions among its citizens when relative deprivations are experienced. For another thing, appeals to persecution are facilitated by victimhood subsuming assessments of emotional suffering, relative deprivation and the internalization of social memories of injustices suffered by peers, (such as hunting friends losing their dogs to wolf attacks) in imagined communities (Hall 2011; Varvin 2005). This is far cry from the direct victimhood of the historically persecuted wolf sketched out in the first section, but the rhetorical effects of such victimhood cannot be overstated.

Hunters' self-attributions of being persecuted present a clear parallel both to indigenous cultures' claims of oppression at the hands of conservation law (Holmes 2016) and, more proximally, to the rhetorical strategy employed by fox hunting enthusiasts in the aftermath of the hunting ban in the United Kingdom (UK) in 2004, claiming that the new policy discriminated against a cultural minority that was in danger of extinction (Nurse 2013; Woods 2003). In this respect, Swedish hunters are simply more forthright in their rhetorical use of the language of persecution than the

UK fox hunters. Nonetheless, the claim of the UK fox hunters to suffer discrimination bordering on extirpation is no more plausible than the explicit persecution claims made by Swedish hunters. This skeptical view of such claims is reinforced by the verdicts of the UK Court of Appeals and the European Court of Human Rights. Indeed, both higher judicial bodies, as well as the 'Burns Inquiry' that had evaluated the hunting by hounds of foxes in the UK, denied British fox hunters from qualifying as a persecuted minority because of anti-hunting legislation (see '*Friend, the Countryside Alliance and Others v the United Kingdom*' in, for example, Nurse 2016).

Nonetheless, we see the persecution claims of hunters as simultaneously good and bad for democracy although, consistent with other authors (Varvin 2005), we are concerned that the bad outweighs the good, finding support for this in the empirical case of wolf conservation in Sweden. What, though, is potentially *good* for democracy in the philosophically and legally indefensible claims of hunters to be persecuted? The answer is that their deployment of victimhood language may succeed in getting the public's attention. But, that said, it does so in the wrong way, not by stimulating well-reasoned public deliberation but by creating a moral panic among the larger public, ultimately responsible for the law of the land: 'Oh, my goodness, are we really like that?'. But such a panic is likely to subside fairly quickly as claims to be persecuted are philosophically and legally debunked. This indeed was the case for fox hunters whose claims were debunked in UK courts. Consequently, the potential 'good' for democracy may devolve into something pathological: public cynicism, as opposed to sympathy.

When hunters understand themselves to be wrongfully persecuted and that the public and state do not take seriously their victimization, our empirical findings demonstrate that hunters withdraw into privatized and self-reinforcing counterpublics (von Essen et al. 2015). In this context, hunters are vulnerable to clinging to wounded attachments, politics of resentment and entitlement based on their victimhood (Varvin 2005). To this extent, we advocate a nuanced view of the democratic potential of the hunters' victimhood. While denying that it has the potential to open up critical and inclusive democratic public deliberation, we argue that the hunters' persecution claims can potentially contribute something *good* to democracy. Specifically, they alert the public to the reality that key constituents of the polity feel deeply alienated from the democratic system. But this problem of alienation from the larger democratic polity is unlikely to be resolved by further higher order judicial decisions, discrediting the hunters' self-perceptions as an aggrieved and persecuted minority.

Consequently, the potential good for democracy of alerting the public to such a problem may be embraced through the creation of novel democratic institutions—such as critical deliberative mini-publics—that are specifically designed to address the concerns and self-perceptions of alienated minorities (Niemeyer 2014) and bring back disengaged citizens into public arenas of dialogue (Gray 2012). This involves addressing the concerns of minorities who feel alienated from the established system of democratic political institutions from the local to the EU levels, and from access to established mass media channels of mainstream newspapers, radio and TV. Primarily, we see the significance of such mini-publics is their being *initiated* by the partisans in a particular controversy. Hence, a critical deliberative mini-public could be initiated by hunters perceiving themselves as a persecuted minority in contemporary Swedish society. Moreover, those initiating the mini-public contribute to the selection of experts from the scientific and judicial communities to provide relevant information to the randomly selected citizen deliberators. But the partisans who initiate the mini-public are required to submit to critical adjudication by their *non-partisan* (randomly selected) peers. This stress on the non-partisan composition of mini-publics ensures that subsequent deliberations cannot be driven exclusively from any one or other partisan perspective (Smith 2013). But it also ensures that the judgements produced by the mini-public cannot be easily dismissed by the partisans who initiated the critical deliberation process as merely the product of 'out-of-touch,' judicial elites, as opposed to a representative sample of their citizen peers.

Conclusion

We have interpreted the phenomenological predicament of Swedish hunters within the framework of their self-perceptions as persecuted victims of wolf conservation policy. Here, hunters' claims to victimhood competed with the victimhood status claimed for wolves by conservationists, despite extensive protections afforded large carnivores under current conservation law. Nonetheless, questioning the philosophical and legal perspicuity of these rival claims, we contended that the language of persecution became interesting only when positioned within partisan politics. In this respect, we argued that hunters' claims of persecution resulted in unproductive democratic deficits, as they withdraw into privatized counter-publics and failed to secure judicial support for their self-perceptions as victimized. Our recommendation was to subject persecution claims to deliberative scrutiny in appropriately non-partisan, critical deliberative mini-publics, made up of representative samples of Swedish citizens. While we do not see such mini-publics as a panacea, we argue they present one eminently practical democratic response to the present controversy in Sweden. Not only do they address what is essentially a problem of alienation from existing democratic institutions to the extent the hunters receive a fair hearing among their citizen-peers but also mini-publics may help to address the moral panic and confusion over the defensibility of persecution claims, giving the Swedish public a more solid foundation on which to adjudicate the partisan rivalry of hunters and conservationists. Such mediating and critical approaches must be sought whenever claims of discrimination and persecution are invoked by citizens marginalized by state policy.

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